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Pulpit Preaching

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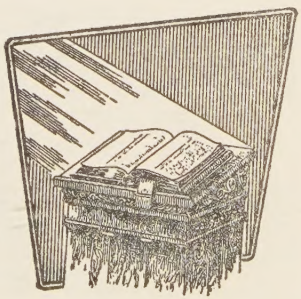

CHRISTMAS TITLES AND THEMES

E. Paul Hovey
The Federated Churches
Lewiston, Idaho

Some texts are invariably in mind when we turn our thoughts to Advent and Christmas sermons. One such verse is Matthew 1:23: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)." How would you interpret the verse?

Joseph R. Sizoo, preaching on the topic, "This Day of Promise," said: "This old story shows what can happen to a community when Christ shares it. Bethlehem was not much of a town . . . What happened in Bethlehem long centuries ago can happen again in any community of nations. What was possible in one place is possible in every place. Hate and strife, contention and racial antagonisms are not inevitable clashings. It is still true what He said long ago, 'And I, when I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me.'"

A. Ian Burnett's topic was "Emmanuel — God With Us" and these are his words: "Christmas reminds us that we are inhabitants of a world in which Jesus has actually lived. He was really born in Bethlehem. The cradle and the Babe, the wise men and the shepherds, the angels and the star, are not just fragments of a beautiful dream, but solid historical facts. Men have seen Christ face to face . . . Jesus Christ was a real man. His life is a fact of world history."

(Continued on page 17)

WORTH QUOTING

The angels said not to fear. Who could be afraid of a tiny baby? One man, however, was afraid when he heard of that birth — a half crazy Idumaean ruler, named Herod, in his castle up in Jerusalem. Any man such as that who is a prisoner to the dreams of power and might and has lost the taste for the sweet and simple everyday things of life, may well be afraid of Jesus. But to men of goodwill the King of peace comes as a Babe in a crib to teach weak men that they can do something for him.

Frederick K. Stamm

* * *

We are like the man in H. G. Wells' story, who came into a haunted house to see the candles on the mantle go out — one after another. Our world is haunted and we are afraid there is no hope for us. Pitiless doom seems to await us.

Yet, there is this songful melody that rings across the centuries: "Fear not." Is this a dependable announcement? If it is, why don't the newspapers and radios flash the news around the world!

Clyde V. Hickerson

* * *

Let us seek, in the Babe of Bethlehem, the one who came to us in order to bear with us everything that

(Continued on page 32)

Next month's themes will be "The Unfolding Years," sermons for January, and "The Twenty-Third Psalm."

Pulpit Preaching

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LOWELL M. ATKINSON
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ANTICIPATING CHRISTMAS IN ADVENT

FOUR IMPERATIVES FOR ADVENT

Lowell M. Atkinson, First Methodist Church, Englewood, New Jersey

Scripture: Luke 1: 57-80

How can we make Christmas worthy of Christ? Increasingly, Christians are confronting this important question. The Advent season is being welcomed as an opportunity for a spiritual discipline that prepares our spirits deeply for the coming of Christmas.

In 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law forbidding the observance of Christmas. What they really wanted to forbid was the wrong kind of observance of Christmas. The struggle to keep Christmas Christian goes on. How many of us are so harried and hurried by preparations to celebrate, that what we are celebrating is lost sight of, and we only know we must get on with it or we will not be ready for Christmas. The fact is we will not be ready for Christmas, unless we are ready in spiritual understanding.

> Though Christ a thousand
> times in Bethlehem be born
> And not within thyself, thy
> soul will be forlorn!"

Some of the Bible verses that have to do with John the Baptist make a very good entrance into the Advent message. "To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God. Whereby the day spring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The hope that had been given by God and that had been claimed by the great prophets and seers of Israel was the hope for one who would come from God to give light to a world that was sitting in darkness and hope to a world that was in despair. The tragedy of history is that when the Messiah came to the people of Israel, He was rejected and crucified by them. But there were some who believed. John the Baptist came as a forerunner, a preparer of the way, telling of the One who would be a Saviour and who would bring hope and heart to men. There were those in Israel who were wanting to believe and experience the coming of the Messiah, a world of those who waited in faith. And so it was that in that tiny colony of those who believed, the Christian church was born.

I

Here are four imperatives for Advent. I must confess I have borrowed these four imperatives and I cannot quite remember from whom I am borrowing them. I think I remember that they are the slogan of the Woman's Society of Christian Service in India. In any event, the four imperatives are know, glow, grow, and go.

What is it that we are to know? We are to know the fact of Christmas, that a Saviour is born. As the Gospel of John states it, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Again, the fact is given to us in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." This is the fact of Christmas — that a Saviour is born, that Christ has

come to save a world of loneliness and shadows and make it a world of light. The first imperative of Advent is to know that hope was born in Christ, that God has acted to save mankind. Theologians call this the doctrine of the Incarnation, God in the flesh. God was incarnate in the Babe of Bethlehem. God lived in human form in Jesus Christ. Without this belief there can be no Christianity. With it there can be no defeat for the Christian church. To know the fact of Christmas, the Bible truth that a Saviour is born and that God has visited His people, this is the first imperative of Advent.

II

The second imperative is to glow. As all readers of Dickens' "Christmas Carol" know, at Christmas everyone at least momentarily becomes forbearing and merciful and forgiving, and benevolence is in the air. It may seem unnecessary to present the imperative, glow. But the secret of the Christmas glow is knowing the fact of Christmas and steeping ourselves in its meaning and significance. To live close to the Babe of Bethlehem so that the light from His manger is the light of our seeing, the hope of all of our being, this is to enter into that world of glowing radiance that God means for us. You cannot really glow unless you know, for the glowing is a by-product of the knowing. To try to glow and be merry at Christmas without knowing what you are merry about is utterly futile. And this is where our Christmas celebration breaks down. Joy without a Saviour is poor substitute for joy about a Saviour. The reason for mirth is Jesus' birth. First we know, and then we glow. For Christianity is not a glum and gloomy thing. If there is not the glow, there is something wrong with what you know! If your religion is grumpy or cantankerous, you may very well examine yourself in Advent, for there is something wrong! The thing that is missing may be the very most important thing of all, that joy-giving fact of the Incarnation, the experience of love and devotion in the presence of the Holy Child, who is God Immanuel, come to give hope and heart to men!

III

The third imperative of Advent is to grow. This is the most neglected imperative of Advent. There is something about Christmas that does not want to change. This is understandable. The rituals in the home at Christmas time bring back glorious memories. The traditions of Christmas deserve to be abiding and permanent. We do not want to change things that we really care about, and growth means change. Should we not grow in soul in the Advent time, gaining a finer understanding of the Christmas fact and the Christmas meaning this year that we have had before, through spiritual enterprise and discipline? I do not think that we should have exactly the same understanding of Christmas now that we had last year and the year before. Our understanding should be deeper and finer and more mature. It should be enriched by a wider range of reading and understanding.

For many years I have tried to read something a little different each Advent Season about Christmas. There are such wonderful things that we want to read not just once but over and over again, and we can add to our list of Christmas writings that have meant much to us. We can enlarge the area of our reading about Christmas. Do you know, for instance, that there are five magnificent chapters dealing with Christmas in England in Washington Irving's "Sketch-book"? Why not add something to your Christmas reading this year, and grow in appreciation of the holy time of Jesus' birth.

Advent is the beginning of the Christian year, and sometimes the thought of it makes me sad. A minister sees so many good things begin that come to nothing. He sees so many high resolves that falter and

fall away. Christmas is a time when you see so much good spirit, which soon seems to evaporate and have no real consequence. The tragedy of the unresolved and incomplete good is one of the great tragedies that we experience in the Christian church. Rather, let us take hold of the fact and meaning of Christmas, maintain the spiritual glow, and grow so that the good that we know will become stronger and not fainter as time goes by!

IV

The fourth imperative is go. After we know the fact of Christmas and have the knowledge of salvation, after we glow in the thought of the tender mercy of our God, and grow as we emerge from the world of darkness into the world of light, then we go. "If you ever have a wonderful experience you ought to do something about it," said William James. It is dangerous to have a glorious experience without doing something about it. Inspiration must become translated into action. The joy and the wonder and the thrill of Christmas find their proper consequence when we go, when we act, when we move forward carrying the spirit of Christmas into our daily life and into the life of the world.

It is the purpose of God "to guide our feet into the ways of peace." I like to think of Christians who are thrilled at the thought of the coming of their Lord at Christmas time as being those who are guided into the ways of peace. God invites us to be his colleagues, his fellow-workers. He guides us to our true life. What a wonderful thing to capture the radiance and enthusiasm and inspiration of Christmas and then to go in the spirit of God! To go, to serve, to act, to do — this is the exercise of the will that captures the enthusiasm of the mind and heart and spirit and gives it constructive expression. Once we have sought the solace of the gospel of Christmas with its wonderful message that a Saviour is born in Bethlehem, then we ought to do something about it. We ought to put that inspiration to work. We ought to go in the name of God to serve, to witness, to work, to help to further the cause of our God.

These are the four imperatives of Advent — know, glow, grow, and go! And may God so bless us in this Advent Season, that we may properly adore and worship the Christ Child on the Holy Day of His birth, and claim Him as our Guide and Redeemer, our life's best Friend, through all the days of the year!

GOD IN DISGUISE

Paul P. Fryhling, First Covenant Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

> Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him. Matthew 2:2.

I recall a childhood recitation that began like this, "Christmas comes but once a year." So, for many, the advent season is merely another holiday time in which they are given a brief respite from their otherwise tedious daily routine. It becomes a season of intensive merrymaking, the exchanging of gifts, and to be sure, a time when the birth of the Christ Child is commemorated as at no other period in the year.

But the first Christmas, we are led to believe, was not so. It was a once-for-all time when God came among men in the disguise of a child. Those who sought diligently for him did truly find him. But to those who were interested primarily in giving and receiving for themselves, he was hid as ever he has been. They worshipped him not, nor gave him gifts. Matthew's account of the wise men is, correctly speaking, the text for Epiphany,

which follows Christmas by twelve days, but it is thrilling any time it is read. At the heart of it is an awe-inspiring question, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship Him."

Here is a dramatic picture of certain wise men from the vicinity of ancient Babylon, who had for long years studied the stars and history and had read the scriptures of their day. Over the sands of the desert that separated Assyria from Palestine, these men in their rich apparel came swaying upon their camels, moving steadfastly westward in the general direction of a great new star which to them was a sign and a guide to the place where they might find the King. It has always been wise men who have been in search of God!

The search of these wise men was a culmination of an age-old quest for that person of the God-head that would fully reveal God. Later scribes were to write, "God, having of old spoken to us through the prophets, hath in these last days spoken to us through His Son" (Heb. 1:1). It is the soul of the wise men that still cries out with the prophet, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might even come before his presence." The finding of Jesus Christ by the wise men was for them, as it has ever been for those who have followed their path, the finding of God and his redeeming grace.

These were not the first men who had peered out into the night, and over the mountains in search for the "sign." It had been the goal toward which the prophets had constantly been pressing: a goal seen only through the eyes of faith. The Hebrew poets and prophets had uttered their rhapsodies about the coming Emmanuel. They knew he was coming; they hoped for it; they looked for the sign. Their souls thrilled with the expectancy of his appearing; they proclaimed to a disinterested world the coming of God's Prince of Peace. And though their bones crumbled into dust long years before the star appeared, they, like Abraham, had seen "his day" through the eyes of faith, and were glad.

Then, "when the fullness of time had come," strange wise men who had seen "his star," were spending their fortunes seeking for the King. But the multitudes in Israel to whom the King had come slept while the star shed its glories all around. John was later to write with pathos, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." There was not so much as room in the inn when the King of Israel came down to man. What a contrast, and what a lesson! Gentiles and "strangers to the covenants of promise" sought the Christ while his self-righteous brethren slept and saw not his glory.

It is further interesting to note, that when the wise men found not the Christ in the expected place, Jerusalem, they continued the search until they found the King. Have we done as much? Too often men are satisfied with the smugness of their own Jerusalem, their own narrow circle of religious form, and so fail to find God for they seek him not in the lowly place.

This, then, is why Christ's first advent is so important: it marks the time when God came in the disguise of man to reconcile the world unto himself. So Christmas this year should discover us following the light which we have, finding God in Christ and worshipping him. For "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself."

In our souls should be the burning question, "Where is he that is born King?" "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might even come before his presence!"

There are four classic sources where God is revealed. Take them in the order of their appearing on earth and in an ascending scale of importance. The first three build up into the great climax of the fourth. God in

disguise may be discovered in Nature, in Man, in the Scriptures; but above all in Christ.

I

Matthew tells us that wise men from the east had seen a "star" which led them to follow it in search for a King. Thus the natural universe was playing a part in revealing its creator, Jesus Christ. Accustomed as the Magi were of looking out into the realm of the stars, what great thoughts and hopes were theirs as they gazed upon the magnitude of celestial things? Their thoughts could not long remain centered upon the shallow little existence which so commonly encompasses life on this earth. As the magnificence of the heavenly panorama moved in all its glory before them, could they have sensed something of God's revealed love as well?

Have you ever looked out into the night at the stars beyond the stars and realized that this little earth is one of the smallest stars in size and magnitude, and that man is but a little speck upon this small portion of God's great universe and our little life-spans are as nothing against infinity of time and space? Yet, with the psalmist you have known the truth that God "thinketh upon me." His grace is greater than his creation!

The Advent of Christ did not eclipse God's universe nor reduce man's need to find his place and meaning therein. Every great divine event had its accompanying revelation or emphasis in nature — the star at Christ's birth, the dove at his baptism, the sun's eclipse at his death and the earthquake at his resurrection.

Little can be done to the soul of man when his sense of being is lost amidst the activity, culture and materialism of our civilization. Man scarcely knows that he is in relation to the awesome aspects of existence. It is well that man is deeply conscious of the universal processes that cradle him in his brief earthly existence. Man must regain a sense of being. People must get a view of themselves against the awesome background of God's infiniteness. Then, like the psalmist, he will declare in wonder, "When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which thou has ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him?"

Truly, God is a master of disguise. Yet the very disguise is, in fact, a revelation. The scientist, in discovering the exactness of God's nature, has revealed a part of the great wisdom of God. Within the shell of a seed, that small, hard, strange-looking substance, there is life which can be transformed into a glorious, growing, fruit-bearing tree. This is Alfred Tennyson's discovery:

> Flower in the crannied wall,
> I pluck thee out of the crannies,
> I hold thee in my hand, root, and stem, and flower, and all;
> But could I know what thou wert, root and stem and flower and all,
> Then I should know what God and man is.

Or Joyce Kilmer's realization:

> I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree . . .
> Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.

Looking upon the indescribable beauties of the sunset, the artist weeps, for he cannot paint it in all its color. To behold God in the vastness of his creation will bring forth the Christmas strains of the angels, "Glory to God in the highest!" Nature is both God's disguise and his revelation.

II

Consider, next, God disguised and revealed in the highest created form, man. To see God revealed in man other than "the man Christ Jesus" is a problem which for some is by far harder to solve than that of finding

him in physical nature. Indeed, it is strange that the one to whom God is to be revealed should himself reveal God.

That there have lived some saintly people who very markedly showed the spirit of Christ in their lives all agree, but to see God in every human, even the worst, requires wisdom from God in great measure. There is in every man a yearning, however nearly extinct, which lifts his soul toward God, though all too often it is cruelly crushed beneath the baser human desires. Scripture teaches that man was created in the image of God, for "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul." That image — intelligent, moral and spiritual — though greatly marred and needing redemption, is still there. But until it is redeemed it is potentially lost.

God still loves that lost soul looking out from the prison of sinful nature. It will be advent in the soul that sees in man the priceless treasures that Jesus saw. "He is not willing that any should perish."

III

The Bible is the classic book in the world. Above and beyond all other books it reveals God for it alone is the inspired Word of God. We turn its pages and from them learn the great truths which can set man free.

Within the Bible, hallowed not only by age but by the very fact of its divine inspiration, is contained the life-giving record of the incarnate Christ. Here as nowhere else in the world can we find the answer to the all-important question, "Where is he that is born King and Savior?" The advice of Jesus was "Search the Scriptures, for in them ye have eternal life." The Bible is sufficient for all. The simple as well as the profound minds find God there.

The Bible is a very human and candid book. It portrays the weakness as well as the strength of its characters. This is God's way of encouraging his people today to know that he desires not so much outward perfection as inward consecration and willingness to obey.

The first purpose of Bible-reading should be to find God. The second is to better know God's will for us and be strengthened by his grace and truth. It is God's gift to the world of men in which those who search diligently might find him. How far short of this do we come? How much of our Bible-reading is merely a response to the shallow idea that it is the Christian thing to do!

Man must find **God** in the Bible or he is missing the purpose for which God gave us his Word. The sinner reads its pages and finds the God who forgives all his sins for Christ's sake. The poor man reads it and finds God, the "giver of every good and perfect gift." The lowly man reads it and finds a God who says, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." The disheartened man reads it and finds the God who can comfort in the time of sorrow, and who is "a very present help in time of trouble."

God is hid in his Word to the extent that the insincere, the unbelieving, the proud "seeing do not see, hearing do not hear nor understand." But to him who will seek with all his heart, God is revealed clearly and is found easily in his Word.

"The Bible finds me," said the poet Carlyle. Truly it is the finding of ourselves when we come to God in his Word.

> We search the world for truth, We cull
> The good, the true, the beautiful,
> From graven stone and written scroll,
> And all old flower-fields of the soul;
> And, weary seekers of the best,
> We come back laden from our quest,
> To find that all the sages said

Is in the Book our mothers read.

IV

We have seen that God comes to man disguised and revealed in nature (His creation), in man (His image) and in the Bible (His Word). These three sources for finding God build up into a great climax in the fourth, Jesus Christ.

The words of God are fulfilled in Christ. The reality of God is seen in Christ. The grace of God is available in Christ. God can be seen in the other sources, but only in Christ can we be reconciled to him.

God's classic disguise was when he lay as a babe in the manger at Bethlehem. Small wonder indeed that the wise men must needs inquire, "Where is he?" But though he appeared only as a babe, appearing to be the son of poor parents, with no crown to adorn his head nor royal regalia about his bed, yet He was "God of very God," the Word which had become flesh to dwell amongst men.

God was never more real to mankind than when he lived in Palestine. Yet the vast majority of the people missed him even on that glad Christmas day. But some, who had sought for him, found the child and worshipped him.

It was more than revelation, however, for which Christ came. It was reconciliation. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." The impact of a lesser personality could not have accomplished what Jesus did. No less of an individual than God incarnate could fulfill the work which was Christ's to perform. We acknowledge the deity of Christ in the earthly Jesus. "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father," are the words of the Savior. Said the late Dr. Hutton, "If God is the solving word for the universe, Jesus is the solving word for God."

It is essential to all our other beliefs that we recognize in the first Advent of Christ the true coming of God among men. Only as we believe in the deity of Christ, can we find an answer to the puzzling question of the prophet, "Oh, that I knew where I might find God."

Ponder well the supernatural and mysterious factors associated with his birth. The constellations of heaven announced his coming. The great, shining orbs of the sky moved in peculiar ways to proclaim to those who were watching, that "a Son was given" whose name was "Emmanuel, God with us." Wealthy and wise men moved steadily across the sands at night in a God-inspired quest. To the common shepherds on the Judean hills, the glory of the Lord and his heavenly host shone around in celestial brilliance to announce in mystic strains of cherubic melody the birth of "a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." These and many other signs cannot be ignored when we seek an answer to the question, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?"

Has God indeed come down to men? And can man have peace with God? Yes, so the prophet announced and so the apostle affirmed, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation . . ."

The prevailing purpose of advent is that in your soul may burn deeply the question for which you will seek an answer, "Where is he that is born King and Savior?" It is to give you new eyes of faith to see and know God as he is truly revealed. Have you experienced the imminent presence of God or have you been satisfied with a few fine-sounding platitudes which have no real meaning in your life? Have you really found the King, or does he remain disguised in mystery?

You need not cry in despair, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him I might even come before his presence." The light has come. He whom you seek is at your door. "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in."

Start out on a great quest for God! No life is full, no mind can rest until it has found God and worshipped him. The wise men found God not only because they saw his sign in nature, saw him revealed in man, and found him revealed in the scriptures of their day, **but because they were not satisfied until they had found him in Christ.**

This is why Christmas is so important: it marks the time when God revealed himself in the fullest and greatest measure to man. Christ is the climax and the conclusion of God's revelation to mankind, and only through Christ is it possible to have the soul's longing satisfied. The other sources of his revelation inspire us and instill within us a deep devotion; they serve to make us desire all the more to know him personally. But when Christ was born, God answered the question, "Where can a soul find God?" The answer is as ever it has been, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself not imputing their trespasses unto them." By believing and trusting this great fact the blessed Advent of Christ will come to your soul.

CHRIST, THE LAMB OF GOD

Armin C. Oldsen, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. John 1:29.

In a Christian home for children the youngsters prepare for Christmas in an unusual manner. Several weeks before the great festival a large candlestick is hung from the ceiling of the little chapel with as many candles as there are days before Christmas. Each candle represents a promise made by God to the people of the Old Testament that Christ the Savior would come. Each evening as the children and the members of the staff gather in the chapel one of the prophecies is read from the Bible. The children repeat it and another candle is lighted. As the number of burning candles increases and as their glow becomes always brighter, the children know that Christmas is coming nearer and nearer. On the night before Christmas Eve a somewhat larger candle is placed upon the chandelier, symbolizing the prophecy of the Savior's great forerunner, John the Baptist. On Christmas Eve, when all the candles are flickering happily and all the faces are smiling cheerfully, one very large candle, burning brightly, is placed on the altar. It is the sign of Christ, the Light of the world. A clear child's voice speaks out, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Then all join in singing excitedly, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King."

I

In a small way the eager expectancy of the children as Christmas approaches is like the anxious waiting of God's people throughout the long stretches of the Old Testament as they looked for the coming of the Savior. They called Him "Messiah" in the Hebrew or "Christ" if they spoke Greek. The fishermen out on the blue waters of the Sea of Galilee, the shepherds on the rocky hillsides or in the green valleys, the housewives at the old village well, the worshipers in the magnificent temple, often pondered the question, "When will the Savior come?" Somewhere on the face of the earth there had always been a pious few who remembered God's promise made to Adam and Eve after they had been driven from the heavenly Garden of Eden, and they asked, "When will the Savior come?" In summer and winter, in war and peace, in prosperity and adversity, there were always those who wondered wistfully, "When will the Savior come?" From time to time the

voice of another of God's prophets reminded the patient and the forgetful, "The Savior is coming," and told a little more about the expected event. At last there came the period in history which was like "the night before Christmas Eve." For four hundred years the voice of the prophets had been still. Then the last of them and the greatest of them all stepped forth to make the thrilling announcement, "The Savior is here! There He is!"

Six months before Christ was to be born in Bethlehem a babe named John came to gladden the hearts of an aged couple in the hill country of Judea. His traditional birthday on the twenty-fifth of June is still observed by a few Christians. The angel had told the bewildered father Zacharias that his boy would be great in the sight of the Lord and that he would prepare the hearts of his people for the coming of the Savior.

The boy John became a man who will be remembered forever as John the Baptist, "the wilderness preacher." And what a preacher he turned out to be! The word "rugged" describes just about everything about the man. The clothes he wore were rough and rugged: a cloak of camel hair and a large belt of animal hide. The food he ate was simple and rugged: roasted locust and the honey of wild bees. The place where he preached was desolate and rugged: the wilderness toward the Dead Sea, far from the vanities and vices of the city. Most of all his preaching was stern and rugged. No polished orator was he, who with the voice of the charmer and the techniques of the diplomat tried to win friends for himself. He wanted to win men for God. He called a spade a spade and sin a horrible offense against God. To hear him preach was to make one feel that the book of his life, with absolutely everything written in it, had fallen open and God was looking at it. "Repent ye!" That was the theme of his preaching. "The Messiah is even now standing in your midst and you have not recognized Him!" That was his startling announcement. John the Baptist may not have been the kind of man we would have chosen as a companion, but we would have had for him a great deal of respect. If the opportunity had been ours, we would have gone to hear him as often as possible. His message came to grips with the greatest problem of all times — certainly also of our times: "Repent ye."

II

The work of John the Baptist reached its climax in one of the greatest moments of all history. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, the thrill of the ages. John saw Christ approaching, pointed to Him and called out, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." The prophecy of prophecies was going into fulfillment. There was no longer any need to wait for the coming of the Messiah. He had arrived. To most of those who saw Him He was a disappointment. He was markedly different from what they had expected.

For centuries loyal Israelites had hoped the Messiah would be an outstanding military hero who would restore the glory that had been theirs under King David. For over half a century most Israelites had deluded themselves into believing that the Messiah would gather a mighty army and drive the hated Roman conquerors and their army of occupation out of the country. No longer would Roman shields flash in their sunshine; no longer would Roman eagels be carried through their cities! No more Roman taxes; no more Roman crucifixions! Some were even more fantastic in their wishful dreams. They believed that the expected Messiah would stand on the shores of the Mediterranean and command the Sea to lay at His feet all the treasure, the gold and jewels, that had come to rest in its bosom. Then Israel would not only be strong; it would be

wealthy too.

Now the Messiah had come. John the Baptist was pointing at Him. But instead of calling Him "The Liberator from the Yoke of Rome" or "The Miracle Worker Who Will Make Us All Rich," John was saying, "The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." How those who had set their hopes concerning the Messiah on earthly things were bitterly disillusioned! What a blessing for us and for all humanity that John could say what he did, that Christ actually was the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. If Christ had been merely another brilliant general or another miracle worker in economics, He would practically have been forgotten and I would not have the grand privilege of inviting you to "behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" — and therefore also yours.

III

The sensational announcement of John should have had more immediate and rich meaning for those who first heard it than it does for us. When the Israelite thought of a lamb he thought of sacrifice. Millions of lambs had been slain as an offering for sin. But their sacrifice had not put a stop to sinning. More sin meant more sacrificing and there seemed to be no end to it. Do you know the story of the scape goat that played an important part in the annual observance of the Old Testament Day of Atonement? Having brought a sacrifice for his own sins the high priest on that day cast lots on two goats. One he slew as a sin offering for the people. On the other he placed his hands and confessed over it the sins of the people. Symbolically the sins of the people were transferred to the goat. It became the sin bearer for the whole nation. Laden with sin that was not its own it was taken so far into the wilderness and lost that it would never be able to return. That simple ceremony helped to assure the pious worshiper that his sins had been taken away forever and he could forget them. What a sigh of relief must have been uttered by those who sincerely took part in that observance. Murderer, adulterer, thief, and all other sinners, guilty of great crimes and evil thoughts, had a demonstration in visual education on how completely God forgives sin. But they knew how utterly valueless were these rites unless faith, looking confidently into the future, connected them with the one wonderful, perfect Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world once and forever. The Lamb of God, who was to die on a cross not far from the temple where the lambs were slain, would not have to be sacrificed again. His sacrifice would be for all time back over the Old Testament and out over the New Testament to the points where time touches eternity. His was to be the sacrifice for all men, Jew and Gentile, Greek and Roman, Oriental and Occidental, rich and poor, criminal and law-abiding.

Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, David and Solomon, Peter and Judas, and—you, let us say. That is the most important application of all. Behold the Lamb of God that takes away your sin, every evil deed your hands have ever done, every unkind and dishonest word your lips have ever uttered, every envious and impure thought your mind has ever held. That is, He'll take away your sin if you will let Him.

IV

Perhaps the sin in your past life does not trouble you any more than the scar of a wound that has long been healed or the memory of a disease that has long been cured. Yet sin is not like a scar that holds no pain, nor like a disease that has spent its force. It is like the germ of a fatal disease that may lie dormant for a while, but that finally always kills. "The soul that sins," says God — and

He makes no reference to the size or kind of sin — "The soul that sins shall die." Sin separates from God and kills forever. It keeps a man from going to heaven. Do you understand why I said it must have been a real thrill for John the Baptist to be able to say, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world?"

God is not only just and loving; He is also understanding. He must have known that also during the years of the New Testament some would have trouble accepting the forgiveness of sins through faith in His Lamb. Have you ever noticed how many pictures there are in the Bible to impress on our sometimes doubting minds the assurance of God's complete forgiveness? The Psalmist says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us." In the first chapter of his stately book Isaiah records God's promise, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. A little later he exclaims, "O Lord, . . . Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." Nathan promised David, "The Lord hath put away thy sins." Imagine, if you will, a cake of ice into which some one has chiseled the word "SIN." Let the ice melt and the word "SIN" will completely disappear except in the minds of those who insist on remembering it.

One of the many little stunts psychology professors like to pull on their classes consists in challenging the students not to think of an elephant for thirty seconds. The student soon discovers that he cannot by sheer force of will oust a thought out of his mind. But there is a simple way to keep from thinking of an elephant and that is deliberately to think of something else, to work a problem in arithmetic, to read something interesting, to engage in conversation. It was never God's intention that man should devote hours and days of his life to trying to forget about the sins that have been forgiven. Paul did speak of "forgetting what lies behind," but he did not stop there. He gave the best recipe in the world for forgetting when he added a word on "straining forward to what lies ahead": "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Don't waste time and energy trying to crowd the thought of forgiven sins out of mind. Use that time and energy in doing something constructive for love of Christ.

"Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Accept Christ by faith, trust and believe in Him, and your sin disappears like a goat lost in the wilderness, like a word from a cake of melted ice. Don't turn your back on Him as you concentrate on the sin that has been forgiven. "Behold the Lamb of God." Dedicate your life to Him. You'll find that life offers so many opportunities to do something for Him, to serve one's fellowmen for love of Christ, there will be no time to worry about sins that have been forgiven.

Christ, the Lamb of God, and in Him forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation, that is God's Christmas gift to the world. God gave not out of a sense of duty or because He wanted something in return. God gave out of love. His gift is useful; it satisfies life's greatest need. His gift is personal; everyone can honestly say, "It's just what I need." His gift is enduring; it does not wear out the week after Christmas; it loses none of its value over the years; it shines brightly in all eternity. His gift arouses no jealousies; all heaven is offered to everyone in the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

DECEMBER IN EVERYONE'S LIFE

Roy A. Burkhart, First Community Church, Columbus, Ohio

Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.
Romans 8:37

December in the land! The chill of grey days; leaves once alive in green and gold, all withered and dry, blown through the streets; fragrant gardens gone to their grave; the lone cry of birds belated in their search for summer climes; far-off sunsets c o l d, austere in their forbidding beauty. December in the heart! The year's end and the acknowledge of hopes unrealized; ships of soul that touched upon our shores have gone, leaving desolate the harbor; a little farther from life's springtime; heading into dreary days of winter; dreams that are dead; springs of aspiration frozen over. Onward we go, perhaps more with dogged determination than with exuberant faith, wondering if life has meaning, fighting to keep the great distaste from victimizing the soul. Winter in the world! Star-like hopes faded from the sky; hatred trampling the flowers of grace and love; dark-drenched horizons, the muttering thunders of threatening storms; the end of things that were beautiful and promising; and unknown and fearsome tomorrows. December is here.

But a poet, writing of Easter and all its heartening hopes, has uttered a sentiment which inspires our faith and bids our fears begone. He thinks of the tree, bleak and leafless, lifting bare, beseeching arms to heaven, and he says:

> Undaunted by Decembers
> The sap is faithful yet;
> The growing earth remembers
> And only men forget.

Nature and history are never discouraged. Only men forget. Only human h e a r t s see no promise in December; only the souls of men find in shipwreck, sorrow and defeat the end of all things. Realizing that only men forget, many a seer has cried, "I will look unto the hills and I will let their patience possess my soul."

There is no dodging Decembers. And it is better so. For it seems that all the progress in soul and society comes when bleak, barren days have turned men's thoughts from the means of living to the meaning of life. Most of our treasures have been found in the darkness. The Renaissance was the terrorizing end of a little world cozy and understandable, all fenced in, where every man could plow his little plot; the Reformation seemed to millions nothing less than the end of a world-destroying storm. Out of great defeats men weave the fabric of great victories; few hearts have been noble which have not first been broken.

Several years ago, a great newspaper came out at the end of December saying something like this: "The gains of the last twelve months have been the gains of men, who, suddenly bereft of their familiar reliances, turned with some earnestness to things that are not material. They have developed resources neglected in softer times. There is not the slightest doubt that millions of men and women survey with gratitude new domes and towers that fill their mental and spiritual skylines."

It is not security that develops the human spirit, but danger. Not in hours of placidity do men build the greatest c a t h e d r a l or paint the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel or write a constitution in Independence Hall. Change is a phase of progress; decay is a prerequisite of growth. If prosperity means only houses and automobiles and refrigerators and no life that transcends them all, then may that blight never return. A new ad-

venture is beginning, a new search. Perhaps a new renaissance, who knows? We strike our tents. And you remember the blind plowman who sang:

Set my hands upon the plow
My feet upon the sod;
Turn my face then toward the east
And praise be to God.

The God that made His sin to shine
Alike on you and me;
The God who took away my eyes,
That now my soul might see.

We cannot avoid Decembers; but they may be fruitful. "The sap is faithful yet; the growing earth remembers." But how can we head into December undaunted—deceived by no false optimisms; blinded by no easy and futile philosophy, but with souls supported by firm and fertilizing faith?

I

We have the right to believe that an eternal purpose runs through life and history and that at least it will not be defeated. All evidence supports that. Empires rise and fall, civilizations wither and die, but some residue of spiritual values is passed on. Off course, if that is true, if God's purpose should be to build in this world a civilization based on the justice of love, then the society built without reference to those spiritual principles must be shaken. We can't have it one way and not the other. If the universe means good and means it intensely, then there must be a day when evil is called to a reckoning. The flame that will warm is also the flame that will destroy. Two things we must do with the mighty purpose of God as we recognize it and believe in it if we are to be undaunted. First, we must learn to wait. We have no right presumptuously to demand that the millennium come in our day; we have no right to say to the dawn, "Be sudden," or the spring, "Be soon." High moral values are hidden in the experience of waiting. Faith is the "evidence of things hoped for."

Creative leaders have known how to win their souls in patience. For patience is love waiting. Paul, having escaped the tyranny of the moment, felt a sublime power when he said, "It is a very small thing that I should be judged of you or of man's day." He was living in God's day. He had escaped the prison of the present. Francis Bacon calmly wrote into his will the patience that waited the judgment of history: "I leave my name and memory to men's charitable speeches, to foreign nations, and the next ages." And Kepler, the scientist, cried with splendid scorn, "I can wait a century for a reader since God waited a million years for a discoverer." This feverish, reckless haste of ours is not faith; we must learn to transcend the impulse that demands that the whole scroll be unrolled before our eyes, now, at once. "They that believe do not make haste."

But we must not stand apart from the stream of purpose, shivering upon its banks. We must plunge right in. The meaning of life for us is to become a part of the purpose; to let peace and justice and love find expression in our souls. Civilizations do pass on the flaming torch of spiritual values. But that is not just because some great remembered men lived for these values. Socrates would be unknown if many had not loved the truth; Jeremiah and Isaiah and even Jesus are remembered and their creative power still molds history because "the remnant" was there ready to respond to their truth and to follow. These mighty ones do but symbolize the multitude, numberless and nameless, who in their day and generation were the channels for the purging and cleansing stream of God's purpose. This

our resolution: "In my day I shall be one of the saving remnant. If cruelty is in the world gentleness shall find its full flower in my heart; when hatred becomes men's virtue, then love shall have new springtime in my soul; when careless injustice is the portion of millions of my brethren, I will so live that in every act and word of mine justice shall find a friend; in a world of grief I will not add one drop to the sea of human suffering. Alone, hoping in God for help—but if not, alone, I will rear my single soul a frail barrier against the storming tides of the world's evil and woe. And I will trust that God's strength will find its perfection in my weakness. If I win or lose, no matter. I am called to faithfulness, not success. The issues are in God's hands."

II

There is a second way in which we can face our Decembers undaunted. In part it is implied in what I have said. It is a mistake to hold a perplexity or a sorrow or disappointment at arm's length. We must take our Decembers to our hearts. We must see tragedy and uncertainty as an essential part of the stuff of life and explore them for their inmost values. It is vain to wait for the storm to pass, for other storms will come; our part is to plunge right into the heart of the many thousand mists in search of life's joys and fadeless beauties. The great apostle says in one of his letters, "I, Paul, the prisoner of the Lord." I like to think of Paul penning those words. He was in Rome. Perhaps a sentry stood at the door of his home; it may well be that he was chained to the arm of a guard; to all men it was evident that this little Jew was the prisoner of Nero. But with the imperial dignity of a soul that touches on other shores than these, he wrote, "I, Paul, the prisoner of the Lord." He took December to his heart, and he was undaunted.

You and I must live in very uncertain and portentous days. What shall we do? We shall say, "Come, uncertainty, since I must live with you, be thou the close companion of my soul and thou shalt teach me a trust which without thee I could never know." Some of the greatest souls the world has ever known explored the secret heart of December and found it a hiding place of God refined in the fire. Think of Jesus with his calvary! He feared not, and instead he said, "Peace I give unto you." Jesus found peace when he took to his heart his bleak December.

Upon the wreckage of thy yesterday
Design the structure of tomorrow. Lay
Strong cornerstones of purpose and prepare
Great blocks of wisdom cut from dark despair.
Shape mighty pillars of resolve, to set
Deep in the tear-wet mortar of regret.
Believe in God—in thine own self believe;
All thou hast hoped for thou shalt have.

III

Finally, we can meet life undaunted if we know a companion who has explored every winter road and known life's deepest December. The heart and meaning of religion is here. Its strength and courage; its faith and confidence come from the communion of human souls with the divine spirit. And we enter in His assurance. It is not that we know the way, but it is the confidence that He does. "Come unto me, I will give you rest; I will take the load off your heart." "But how, Master? Will you spell all of life's meaning for us? Will you tell us what lies beyond the hills?" "No, but I will go with you; I will give you a comradeship that shall make

you travel the lowliest road and climb the highest peak all in quiet confidence."

He who has found a great love knows in a small way what an intimacy with the Divine is in the bleak and hazardous December journeys of life.

To the perplexed Christ is certainty; to the wounded He is healing; to the sin-laden, a Savior; to all the weary, He is rest. After all, Christmas is buried in the heart of December! On the December air listening love can hear the rustle of a wing and yet catch the far, faint melody: "Fear not, fear not. Unto you is born a Savior. Peace on earth to men of good will."

Undaunted, let us face December.

CHRISTMAS TITLES from page 2

Other preachers have selected these topics for this verse: "When God Comes In" (Ralph W. Sockman), "The Presence and the Promises" (Jasper Massee), and "The Hopes and Fears" (Waights G. Henry, Jr.).

* * *

Another favorite Christmas text is Luke 2:10: "And the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people.'"

Ilion T. Jones, under the topic, "The Good Glad News," wrote on the good news about God, man, life and the world: "God has unveiled his purpose fully to found a new world community centering in the truths unveiling in Christ. Everywhere Christians went they brought to 'a world that had lost its nerve because it had lost its way' the 'glad certainty' that God had willed the founding of a universal family in Christ, that he had 'guaranteed that a divine society would constitute the goal of history.' It was that daring dream, that unimagined hope, that rolled away the mists of pessimism and opened new vistas for a weary, despairing society. It was a dark hour when Jesus was born. None could have foreseen that a baby, born of a lowly mother on the fringes of the Roman Empire could become the most important person in that empire . . . The light of his life still shines as an encouragement to us and as a beacon to beckon us on."

Other topics based on this verse are: "The Christian Confidence" (G. Ray Jordan), "Hospitality to the Son of Man" (Marvin Franklin), "The Light That Shone" (Frederick K. Stamm), "On Putting Christ into Christmas" (Charles M. Crowe), and "What Makes Life Significant?" (Teunis Gouwens).

* * *

A third Christmas text is Luke 2:14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

Woodrow Geier's suggestive title for this text is "The Divine Quest for Man's Soul." He writes: "It would do Americans good this Advent to take a serious look at antiquity; for in antiquity we could see ourselves! Look at those Romans when God set his everlasting light in Bethlehem's streets. Roman ingenuity and enterprise had achieved the highest standard of living (for some Romans) on earth. Roman "go-gettiveness and know-how" had awed the world. There was no power on earth to compete with Rome, with her largest army and navy and vast material resources. Romans were dazzled by their own wit and skill, but they were progressive about it all . . . the world existed for Roman pleasure. Roman arrogance became a deadly disease, killing creativity and ever lusting for more luxury and power. Romans became less and less capable of seeing the truth about themselves. Patrician women exposed their unwanted babies to the beasts in order to revel

in the vanities of the times. They never suspected that the Baby of a humble Jewish woman should become the judge of their perversity. Maybe Christina Rossetti was right when she described our Lord's birth "In the bleak midwinter"; for . . . Lord did come into the midwinter of man's sin and self-imposed exile . . . Those Romans saw only the stars of their own splendor; they did not see the Star. They did not hear the angels sing . . . with their ideas of success and power, they could not imagine that the birth of a Jewish baby was judging them."

Dr. Sockman's unusual topic, "The Dog and the Manger," is developed with these words: "An artist shows the shepherds on the hillside . . . At the feet of one is his dog . . . The dog is aware that something unusual is happening, but he does not know what it is. He is missing the message heard by his master . . . The difference between the dog and the shepherds portrays the differences of the Christmas event . . . The shepherds heard a song. The wise men from the east saw a star which the other dwellers did not. And neither the song nor the star disturbed the dining and slumbering guests . . . What varying degrees of meaning Bethlehem held for those first beholders. And then there was the dog. He too went along. He looked up. He went to Bethlehem, but Bethlehem did not get into him."

* * *

Among my favorite topics on Luke 2:7, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn," are the following: "Are We Ready for Christmas?" (Francis Downs), "'Crowding Christ out of Christmas" (John A. Hayes), "The Housing Problem in Bethlehem" (Henry Kuizenga), "The Innkeeper's Dilemma" (Charles L. Allen), "The People Who Missed Christmas" (Roy L. Smith), and "Visitors to Bethlehem" (John F. Mulholland).

I want to list several topics for yet another Christmas text, Luke 2:9: "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear" — "The Glow of Glory" (William Frederick Dunkle, Jr.) and "The Stars Still Shine" (Everett W. Palmer).

Harold C. Phillips' topic, "Christmas and Frightened Men," is followed by this message: "The shepherds were frightened by His coming. . . . Old King Herod, too, was frightened . . . The first Christmas, then, came to frightened men. So does this Christmas. We live in a frightened world.

Now, in the first place, let us see the difference between the nature of the fear that came upon the shepherds and that which troubled Herod. . . . The shepherds' fear was the fear of God; Herod's fear, as is ours, was the fear of man. It was said of the Puritans that they feared God and so feared nothing else. We have lost the fear of God and so are afraid of everything . . . The fear of the shepherds liberated them . . . They passed to the adventure of faith. 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem.'

One of our modern novelists describes a character by saying that Edith was a little island bounded on the north, south, east, and west by Edith. That must have been a fear-infested little place! And that is why Herod's world is always a fear-infested world. It is bounded just by his selfish interests . . . Herod's world must die if man is to live . . . God who broke into history in the birth of Christ, revealing his universal love for all men . . . points to the death of the Herod spirit and the birth of the Christ spirit."

WESLEY P. FORD
THEODORE P. FERRIS
NENIEN C. McPHERSON, JR.
GENE E. BARTLETT
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THERE'S A STAR IN THE SKY

Wesley P. Ford, Central Christian Church, Pasadena, California

Some experiences are best told through the language of poetry. Christmas is of this nature. We reach its height not through logic or argument but through story and song. We are the losers here if we will not give the green light to our imaginations. The season bids us give up childishness to become childlike. In Matthew's account of the Christmas story the star is a principal factor. Wise men came from the East saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east." Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained what time the star appeared. And as the wise men searched, the star which they had seen in the east, went before them. So important is the star that a Christmas scene is hardly complete without it. This morning we give our attention to the star, on Christmas eve we will consider the Babe as God's gift.

I

Note first that a star is the result of God's effort, not man's. Something ought to happen to one's ego when he looks at a star. Theodore Roosevelt was an amateur astronomer. He liked to go out at night with one or two friends and look at the stars. He would single one out, contemplate its distance from the earth, then say, "Now we are small enough, let us go home." In the stars one sees the majesty of God's handiwork before which, if he thinks at all, he must stand in awe. We take credit for much but no man boasts that he made the s t a r s. There is an elementariness about the Genesis account of creation, but there is also in the a c c o u n t profound insight. "God made the stars also, and set them in the firmament."

It was neither the echo of their own voices nor the reflection of their own lamps that spurred the wise men on. It was the song of angels.

> It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old,
> From angels bending near the earth, To touch their harps of gold.

That glorious song originated with angels, not with men. Man may think he did it all and he may reject or deny the fact of a benevolent Father, but all the while he lives on the accumulated capital of God's investment and God's activity. There is a star in the sky. God did that.

II

Second, note that the stars are silent. There is a tendency in our day to measure worth by noise. Traffic, jet planes, and an occasional sonic blast all seem to remind us that we are big and strong. A century ago Ruskin wrote, "No changing of place at one hundred miles per hour, no making of stuff at a thousand yards per minute will make us one whit stronger or wiser. We shall be obliged at last to confess what we s h o u l d long ago have known, that the really precious things are thought and sight not pace." And he might have added to his prophetic insight "not noise."

While we live in the midst of noise, congestion, and s p e e d the greatest miracles still occur slowly and silently. Did you ever hear a seed burst its shell that a new plant

might live? Did you ever hear a rose open its petals? Did you ever hear a child grow? Did you ever hear a dream or a new thought?

> How silently, how silently,
> The wondrous gift is given!
> So God imparts to human hearts, The blessings of his heaven.

Still God imparts his blessings silently. And God is more ready to give than we are to receive. Perhaps we too could hear the angel's sing if we could learn to listen. The stars are silent.

III

Third, the stars remain beyond our reach. The wise men set out to follow the star, but it went before them. The stars are always before us. They elude us. But man's quest for the star is a reminder that he has the glorious capacity to link himself to something beyond himself. The immigrants who first settled America were pursuing a goal beyond themselves. It was not economic security or peace of mind they sought; it was a freedom worth living for and worth dying for. Always the most has been given back to society by those who were in pursuit of a goal beyond themselves.

Is not this the thrust of Jesus' injunction, "Seek first the kingdom of God"? One says such a high goal is impossible of attainment. But that is not the issue. Fruit comes abundantly from the search, and a lesser goal means less striving, less growth and finally disappointment. Pleasure, when sought for itself, destroys the seeker. Success, when sought as an end, has no permanent foundation and leaves one wanting. It is a wise injunction that says, "Hitch your life to a star." And the prophet spoke with vision when he said, "They shall mount up with wings." Take the impossible. Life becomes strong in the struggle along the journey not in arrival at some easy destination. The wise men went in pursuit of a star. Always wise men are pursuing stars for wise men have the capacity to strive for that which is beyond themselves. "Seek first the Kingdom of God."

IV

Fourth, a star is fixed. It is as permanent as the universe is permanent. Our social patterns are always in transition. What was is not, and what was not is. A young man wrote a book about women, a dangerous thing to do. Some years later he republished it but instead of revising all the material he wrote in the preface; "Wherever the word 'is' appears substitute 'is not', and wherever the words 'is not' appear substitute 'maybe' or 'perhaps'." We are all a part of the process which is change. Yesterday's patterns are not adequate.

And as both our methods and moods change we discover too that not every one with whom we deal can be trusted always to do right. Sometimes our friends let us down. And for all the market changes, and for some business fails. For others illness or accident change the outlook and the mode of life. One asks what will tomorrow bring, what can be counted on? "Change and decay in all around I see." Amid the changing scenes look to the stars. The firmament showeth his handiwork, and that handiwork abides. "Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." This is the message of the stars.

Lloyd Douglas told how he loved occasionally to visit an old man who taught violin lessons. He had a tiny studio set in a long row of rooms where other music teachers also taught. One morning Mr. Douglas entered the little room with the greeting, "Well, what's the good news today?" Putting down his violin the old teacher stepped over to a tuning fork suspended from a silk cord in the center of his tiny room.

He struck it a blow with a padded mallet and said, "There is the good news for today. That, my friend, is A. It was A all day yesterday, it will be A all day tomorrow, next week and for a thousand years. The soprano upstairs warbles off-key, the tenor next door flats his high ones, and the piano across the hall is out of tune. Noise all around me, noise; but that, my friend, is A."

So take heart, there is a constancy in our midst. Something there is that is everlasting, and that is everlastingly right. Some things have come loose but not the moral order. The Ten Commandments will not budge; the Sermon on the Mount is as fresh as the morning headlines; no power failure has ever delayed the rising of the sun; there are some landmarks by which we can find our way.

We get lost on the mountains of our temporary successes, and in the valleys of our momentary failures. But no one needs stay lost. This is our hope. There are sure signs and certain markings. There's a star in the sky. It marks the way geographically, it also marks the way morally. Economic systems rise and fall but God's moral order abides. It was a dark night and the inn was filled. But Christmas was God's affair and no man could stop it.

> Let goods and kindred go,
> This mortal life also;
> The body they may kill:
> God's truth abideth still, His
> kingdom is forever.

There is a star in the sky.

We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him. Have we r e a l l y seen the star? It is evidence of God. Something has been done for us. It is silent, how silently the wondrous gift is given. The star is out of reach, seek first the Kingdom. Only as we link ourselves to that which is beyond us will we save ourselves and others. And amid all our changing patterns the star abides forever. "O Thou who changest not, abide with me." If we can learn from the star we will take a long step toward peace on earth and good will among men.

THE CHRISTMAS ANNOUNCEMENT

Theodore P. Ferris, Trinity Church, Boston, Massachusetts

There are two ways to prepare for Christmas. One is to think of the meaning of Christmas in terms of the modern world we live in and the contemporary thoughts we think. The other way is to think upon the Christmas story itself, and let it speak to us. I h a v e chosen the second. We turn, therefore, to the Christmas story, not to dissect it or analyze it the way a historian might, and the way we might on other occasions. This is not the time for that. We turn to it to lose ourselves in the wonder of it.

I

The story begins in Rome, the center of the western world, I almost said the civilized world, because we westerners have a way of forgetting that to the east of our world are other cultures and civilizations much older than ours—Persia, Babylon, India and China. But it was, nevertheless, the center of the civilized world, already an ancient city, the Eternal City, set on seven hills.

The story begins in Rome, and with Augustus Caesar, the nephew of Julius Caesar, the man who defeated Anthony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium, and made himself the sole ruler of Rome, the first Emperor of Rome, and for forty-four years was the master of the western world. It begins in Rome with Augustus Caesar and with a royal command that everyone go to his own home town to be registered. Whether such a census actually took place

or not, and at this particular time, we do not know. Historians vary in their opinions and, as I have already said, we are not going to try at this time to penetrate this secret.

This much we do know. We can never escape the machinery of life. In every well-run government there is a certain amount of red tape and regulation that is inevitable and inescapable. In every well-run family, indeed in every well-run life, there is a certain amount of law and order that often seems to be like so much red tape and we never can completely escape it. Sometimes it seems as though it ties everything up in knots and that we are caught like a fly in a spider's web. Even God himself, when he came into our world, did not circumvent the machinery that sometimes so irritates us and makes life so unpleasant. He came right out of a p i e c e of imperial machinery which made life complicated and difficult for many people.

II

The E m p e r o r who seemed so grand as the Christmas story begins to unfold itself, and the decree that seemed so important, in the city that looked so impressive, all eventually fade into relative insignificance before Something Else that happened in an obscure corner of the world.

The story now moves to that corner, a distant province of the Roman Empire, called Judaea. It m o v e s from the center of things to the edge of things. This is unusual, in a sense; if you were constructing the plot of a story, you would move gradually from the edge further and further in toward the center, but this story seems to move from the center of the world to one of its furthest edges. It moves from the high and mighty to the low and little people, the people who are pushed around in life, this time a couple caught in the machinery of government.

They complied with the regulations; they had no choice, really. It was not a convenient time for them to make a trip, probably on foot, to Jerusalem. The wife was about to have a child. There was nothing for them to do but to go, and they went to Bethlehem for this was Joseph's city. It was a tiny village, but it was a village with a great past, great simply because one man had left his mark upon it. It was David's city. It shone like a star among all the towns and cities of that little province. So Joseph and Mary made their way from the northern county of Galilee southward, paralleling the Jordan, through Jerusalem, and then on to the little village of Bethlehem.

Things look backward as well as forward in life. Things do not happen out of the blue. There is continuity in life; one thing leads to another, and what we do today will have consequences for what we are tomorrow, and what we are today is to a great degree the result of what we did yesterday. When God came into the world, he too came out of the past, with roots in history, and he was born in a city that had a great memory. Jesus was a branch on a full-grown tree, a shoot out of the stump of Jesse. In other words, there was development that led finally to J e s u s, through the prophets and the p r i e s t s to the Master.

We inevitably look backward at Christmas as well as forward. We look back to the place we came from, to the home in which we first met life and, if it was a good home with a happy family, we have nothing but gratitude in our hearts. How often we wish we had appreciated it more at the time, and expressed that appreciation! We look back to the soil from which we have come and to the family circles which have given us our life and introduced us to the meaning of life and helped us to meet it.

There in the town of Bethlehem Mary's baby was born. The only thing on earth as common as birth

is death. Both are utterly mysterious; both are completely beyond our comprehension, but birth is the greatest mystery, the creation of life where there was none, the planting of a seed which may unfold into a personality that will change the course of the world; the hidden possibilities and potentialities, all the wonder and the beauty of a life that is yet to be. This certainly is the mystery of all mysteries and it stirs us whether the birth is the birth of Jesus or the birth of our own child. If ever a man becomes so accustomed to it that he ceases to wonder at it, he is lost.

III

To make matters worse than they already were, the inn was full because other people were going to the same town for the same reason that Mary and Joseph were there. There was no place for the Galilean couple. People who had come first were given priority, which was quite right. The innkeeper did the best he could and gave them a place in the stable and there the baby was born. The circumstances of life are not always favorable to life's highest and finest possibilities. Let us put that down somewhere in our subconscious mind this Christmas season, and let me remind you of a few specific instances, although you could repeat them and add to them, I am sure, at great length.

John Keats was the son of a livery stable keeper. By the time he was twenty he was infected with tuberculosis and died when he was twenty-six. And yet, out of those ungracious circumstances came the magic of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and all the other poems that have sung in the minds of English-speaking people ever since. Hans Christian Andersen was the son of a cobbler. His father and mother were so poor that they had to make their own furniture, and the bed that he was born in was the frame of a coffin that a Count had died in. And yet, out of those unfavorable circumstances came the most delicate, fragile fairy stories that the world has ever heard. Gilbert Stuart, who has painted not only the face of George Washington but so many other faces that are familiar to us in the history of our country, was the son of a Scottish snuff-grinder who migrated to this country without a cent. Robert Burns was a ploughboy. Ben Jonson was a bricklayer. Albert Einstein was so slow to learn to talk that his parents thought him abnormal and teachers considered him a misfit. Booker T. Washington was born in a single-room cabin; his mother was a slave and nobody ever quite knew who his father was.

Indeed, the circumstances of life are not always favorable to life's highest and finest possibilities. We might go so far as to say that when the circumstances of life seem to be most unfavorable we sometimes have the finest flower of human achievement. A cattle stall is not exactly the place where you would expect the Prince of Peace to be born, nor are any of the circumstances of his life what we would consider adequate for the raising and nurturing of a child. And yet, out of these poor things, what great things grew! The wings of the spirit are not bound by the bands of earth.

There is no promise in the Gospels that the circumstances of life will always be favorable. The promise is that God will always more than match the circumstances of life with the strength to meet them.

IV

The story finally moves out into the fields, under a night sky. It moves again in a strange, unusual way. It moves from Caesar and his royal decree to some shepherds and their flocks. It moves from the mighty to the humble. After all, it is not the great things of life in which the seed of life is to be found, but in the small things. Not always, mind you. Be careful how you use

the word "always," particularly if you are a preacher or a theologian. Don't make an absolute claim for everything. But usually it is not the great things of life in which the seeds of life are to be found, but in the small things, things like a word, or a gesture, or a glance; things like a simple man doing a good, straightforward, honest deed; things like an unknown person responding to the intimations of the highest. In things like these we find the seeds of creative life just as we find in the Bethlehem manger scene the life that has made life possible for so many other people.

There were the shepherds, surprised by an angel. Don't ask who the angel was, or what he was like, or whether he had a physical body or not. You cannot put these things in photographs. You can paint them, and you can sing them, but you cannot take pictures of them. But whatever the form of the angel, the angel had an announcement, and the announcement was not that the world would be perfect from then on, but that a Saviour had been born. In other words, the Christmas announcement was not that life would be perfect or that all would be well from that moment onward. The announcement was that into the imperfect world that we live in had come a saving Life.

Then the heavens began to sing for joy, Glory to God, and Peace to Men. And the story ends quietly and simply as the shepherds go quite faithfully and obediently, without asking any questions, to Bethlehem. They were not at all like we would be. They were not sophisticated. They were not skeptical. They went straight to Bethlehem to see what had happened, and they found things exactly as they had been told. They saw a man, and a mother, and a baby.

The moral of the story is this. Into this imperfect world comes the perfect love of God. and wherever and whenever that love of God in Christ comes, there is g l o r y and peace. Wherever, whenever, now, here, in you, through you, in situations, no matter how tragic or how complex they may be, wherever the love of God in Christ comes there is glory and peace.

GOD DWELLING AMONG MEN

Nenien C. McPherson, Jr., Grace Methodist Church, Dayton, Ohio

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

There was once a little spruce tree standing in a huge forest surrounded by very tall trees. The little tree felt dwarfed by these giants of the forest. On a clear night, the little spruce could look up through the leaves of the taller trees and see the stars. The little tree was enchanted by their beauty and a great longing took possession of it. If it could only grow tall enough to pass the other trees so that it could reach up and touch the stars. For this tree, the stars were the most beautiful things in all the world and yet they were so far beyond him. The little spruce tree did continue to grow, but remained small compared to the other trees for they grew even taller year by year.

One day in the winter time, a father and his young son came into the forest with an axe to secure a Christmas tree. They looked all around and the father saw many of the taller trees that seemed just right; they were straight and very dignified. The little boy finally saw the little spruce tree. This was the one they selected. The father cut it down and they took it home with them. There they were joined by the mother and the baby sister, and together they decorated

it for Christmas. The mother popped the corn and made long strings of it; the colored balls were placed on the tree with the popcorn strings, and some tinsel was added; the lights were strung over the tree; on the very top, a star was placed that shone very brightly.

The little tree looked up that night when the lights were turned on and the thing it had always dreamed might happen had come to pass. It was very pleased with the beautiful decorations and the lovely lights, but most of all it was glad for the star that rested on its very top. The little spruce tree had not grown tall enough to reach the stars, but a star came down to rest on it; the great longing was satisfied in an unexpected way.

I

Here is a parable of Christmas. Man could not reach up to God, so God came down to dwell among men in the life of the man Christ Jesus, born a helpless babe on that first Christmas morn. As Paul wrote to the Galatians: "God sent forth his Son, born of woman . . . so that we might receive adoption as sons." Man's deepest longings for God are always satisfied, but not always as man expects them to be.

Man's sense of incompleteness is the surest sign of divinity w i t h i n human life. We remain forever discontented with what we are and have achieved. It is because of this spark of the divine within us that we have needs that nothing human can satisfy. This it is that keeps us ever striving to find the meaning of life and to answer the basic questions that come to any thoughtful man: Why are we here? What can we hope for? Where are we going?

One of the saintly s o u l s of the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux, expressed this sense of incompleteness and this need for something more than human in a verse of one of his hymns:

Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts!
Thou Fount of life! Thou Light of men!
From the very best bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

We find the meaning of life in Jesus even as we find the nature of God revealed in and through him; we find this even when we are not willing to accept his Lordship for our lives. We know that it is only through him that the fullness of life can be found.

The Hebrew prophets were convinced that God took the initiative in his dealings with his human children. When we long to find God, it is God already working within our spirits to cause us to seek him. They knew that it was God who was disclosing himself to men and not merely that man discovered God. We have here one of the profound paradoxes of our faith. The prophets were spokesmen for God and they traced the working of the living God through the tragic life of the nation as he called his people back to himself and the ways of righteousness through judgment, through his healing mercy and his faithfulness. This movement reached its peak in the great Second Isaiah of the Exile who saw that even the suffering and abuse of the nation heaped upon them by less worthy nations was to be used by God to draw other nations to him. God did not will the evil upon them, but he would use their suffering to make them a light to the Gentiles that all men might be one in him.

The first century of our Christian era dawns as the people "were living in expectation" that God would intervene in their behalf, that God would deliver them from their enemies. Their expectation of God's deliverance, sometimes with and sometimes without the thought of a Messiah (Christ) as his agent, received an unexpected and revolutionary fulfillment in the coming of God to dwell

among men in Jesus of Nazareth.

The people generally believed in the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Some thought it would happen through their faithful keeping of the Law; others thought they should take up arms and strike a blow for themselves and then God would intervene to give them the victory. All who believed that God would send his Messiah were convinced that he would destroy their enemies and rule from the throne of David, with all the nations of the earth being subordinated to the restored Israel. Their longing for deliverance was fulfilled in an unexpected and transformed manner. The poet, George Macdonald, in "That Holy Thing," makes it clear:

> They were all looking for a king
> To slay their foes and lift them high;
> Thou cam'st, a little baby thing
> That made a woman cry.

II

We assume the significance of Jesus Christ as self-evident and are inclined to imagine that when he was born all the world was aware of the coming of God to dwell among men. The plain fact is that no one paid any attention to the little baby born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. We have a Negro spiritual that states this truth in poetic form: "Sweet little Jesus boy, we didn't know who you was." Apparently, neither his mother Mary, nor Joseph, nor the innkeeper realized that God had come to dwell among men in the birth of the Christ-child. They didn't know who he was. The lesson includes the statement that "Mary kept all these things (which the shepherds told her), pondering them in her heart." If Mary realized the significance of the birth of her firstborn son, she must have forgotten it before she and Joseph took him to Jerusalem when he was twelve that he might become a fullfledged "Son of the Torah," that is, take upon himself the religious obligations of the community much as we "confirm" our children at about the same age, making them full members of a local church. They found him, after leaving Jerusalem and missing him a day's journey away, in the Temple, asking questions and seeking to know more about the Torah (the will of God for his people) in conversation with the wise men in the Temple. His parents were astonished and disturbed.

At a much later date, after he had begun his public ministry, we find Mary and his brothers coming to take him back home, fearing he was out of his mind. ("Then they went indoors, but the crowd gathered again, so that it was impossible even to have a meal. And when his family heard this, they set out to get hold of him, for what they said was, 'He is out of his mind.'" Mark 3:20-21, Moffatt's translation. Compare the rest of the chapter, where clearly the reference to "his family" includes his mother as well as his brothers.)

What would have gotten the headlines of the "Jerusalem Daily News" (if there had been such a newspaper then) on this first Christmas morning? That Jesus was born who was to be the Saviour of men and in whom God's Holy Spirit was to dwell fully so that henceforth men would know what God was and what he wanted them to be? That could not have been what took place: that was not the important news that the people of Palestine recognized on this first Christmas. The headline writer likely would have put in bold print: "Caesar Augustus Orders Census; All Are To Be Taxed." Luke's Gospel tells us: "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed . . . And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city."

Caesar Augustus was quite an impressive figure. As the Emperor of the Roman Empire he had extended its boundaries and welded the people together with an iron hand. Julius

Caesar, his uncle, had been killed in 44 B.C. For a time there were three men who shared the authority of Julius Caesar in the Empire, but by 27 B.C. the other two were out of the picture and now the Roman Senate conferred upon this nephew of Julius the title "Augustus," meaning "majestic," and he became the sole emperor. He ruled longer than any other emperor of the Empire and died at the age of 77 in 14 A.D. Again, the Senate raised him to full equality with his uncle in a semi-divine state and had his name inscribed in the Pantheon in Rome, the temple of the Roman gods.

It is quite certain that what would have impressed the people of the little Jewish nation most on the first Christmas was that Caesar Augustus, a man of great power, was taking more of their meager possessions in the form of a new tax. They were not concerned about the baby Boy born to peasant parents in a stable in Bethlehem and if they had known about His birth they could not have imagined that He would someday surpass the mighty Caesar Augustus in importance and significance for mankind.

III

The "gospel," the "good news," that God is like Christ and that God came to dwell among men in Christ, although it dates from the birth on the first Christmas morning, did not really begin with Christmas but rather with Easter, some thirty years later.

Paul's letters were written before any other book in the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written. Both Paul's letters and Mark's Gospel center around the fact that Christ survived the death upon the Cross and is the risen, living Christ; that is, they give little heed to the birth of the Christ-child and much attention to him who was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:4). Mark begins his gospel with the words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Paul and the author of Mark's Gospel believed in the humanity of Jesus, "born of a woman," but the power of God was so evident in Jesus that it was inevitable that they should concentrate on the fact that while he was a real man he was more than a man: the Son of God. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews begins his letter thus: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . . He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature."

For none of these New Testament writers was the divinity of Christ revealed by the manner of his birth, but rather by what God had done through him and was continuing to do "through his Spirit let loose in the world." The central theme for Paul was: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." That is, God was in Christ drawing men into fellowship with himself through gracious forgiveness; through a mercy that is without limit; and a love that is not dependent upon the worthiness of his human children.

IV

We rightly evaluate the birth of Christ as the supreme event of history; it is God's unexpected fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of his people from the beginning of time. We correctly divide all time between the period before Jesus was born and the period afterward which we recognize as a particular "year of our Lord." So Christmas very early grew in significance among the followers of the Christ.

Matthew and Luke, writing some ten to fifteen years after Mark's Gospel had appeared, drew on all "the creation of prophetic imagination and adoring love" to say how significant was the birth of the Christ-child. They found no stories, no legends,

and even no myths too wonderful to describe the event that took place on Christmas day. We should always remember that legends and myths are not unreal and false. They are rather like poetry, vehicles through which profound truths can be spoken to those who have eyes sensitive to see and ears attuned to hear. They must not be reduced to prosaic, literal descriptions of what took place; they deal with the deep meaning of events.

We find these latter Gospel writers telling about a unique star that guided the wise men who came from the far corners of the known earth to pay homage at the cradle of the little boy Jesus, bringing rich gifts declaring his royalty. They have the angels singing in the heavens and declaring that there shall be peace on earth among men of good will. They have the shepherds to hear the angel voices and come in wonder to pay their respect and give their humble gifts to the Saviour of men. All of this, and more too, was to say that the supreme event of history took place in the birth of the Christ-child and the life of devotion to God's will he was to live. Such basic spiritual truths can only be seen by the eye of faith, by a kindled imagination, by those sensitive to the unseen values that give life its meaning and direction.

The hymn writer described the entrance of spiritual truth in an adequate fashion when he wrote:

> How silently, how silently
> The wondrous Gift is given.

Those who are blind to the unseen realities all around them will never know the significance of that first Christmas event, but will remain forever empty and shut in by the things that can be seen only through the physical eye. Walter Russel Bowie, describes such persons, in "The Empty Soul":

> At the end will be but rust;
> Where earthly treasures are;
> They whose eyes are in the dust
> Will never see a star.
>
> They who came to Bethlehem
> And only dross have sought
> Will take away alone with them
> The emptiness they brought.

V

Christmas is the most glorious season of the year with its promise that no matter how dark the day and how long the night, God dwells among men. Life for men can never be the same again because in the long ago God broke into human life in coming to dwell among men in one who was born a helpless babe and grew to be the man in whom God could dwell to draw all men unto himself.

It is of no use for us to praise the wonders of Christmas and the glorious and generous spirit that takes possession of most men at this season, unless we are willing for this Christmas spirit to possess us completely and remain with us throughout the year.

> Though Christ a thousand times
> In Bethlehem be born,
> If He's not born in thee,
> Thy soul is still forlorn.

So sang Angelus Silesius in his seventeenth century hymn, "In Thine Own Heart."

Caesar Augustus is all but forgotten now, except for a few historians and the fact that he was emperor when Christ was born. The birth of Christ becomes more and more significant year after year and for more and more of God's children. The God who gave salvation to mankind through coming to dwell among men in this unexpected way in Bethlehem must continue to work in us to redeem each of us in all the unseen, silent ways at his command. This God never forces his Spirit upon us. He always enters when we hear his voice and open the door from within to the changed attitudes and ways of responding that he would help us achieve. Christmas should be a time of self-examination that the Christ's Spirit may be born anew in us:

Is there some secret act of
kindness we can go and do?
Is there some word of mercy
and sympathy we can speak?

Is there some way in which we can take the relationship of love that has perhaps grown casual and taken for granted, and in some quiet, undramatic way cause it to spring into new life?

Is there some silent way we can let the Christ be born in us today that will make us more eager to believe the best about others, more tender and more sensitive to human need, more unselfish and more loving in all our attitudes and ways, and more understanding of and patient with each other?

Man cannot reach up to God, the Creative Spirit, for he is the infinite power upon whom we and all things depend, but God can and has reached down to man in Christ Jesus. He not only came to dwell among men in Christ, but he remains with men in the fellowship created through the same Holy Spirit that was in Christ Jesus. God does dwell among men. God would dwell in each of us. Let it be our prayer this Christmas time that he shall find a receptive heart in each of us.

THE HIGH AND THE HUMBLE

Gene E. Bartlett, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, New York

It's strange how everyday words sometimes stay with you. It happened to me recently. In a passing conversation on the street we mentioned a mutual friend who lived at some distance. "Have you had any word from him recently?" asked the other. Then we exchanged our word about him. Moments later I was at my desk to work on this Christmas sermon. And again the words came back with new meaning, "Have you had any word from Him recently?" Somehow it brought new urgency and meaning to the Christmas message. For it is turning that question to our thought of God which makes a word like this so important.

The answer to that at Christmas time is a glad and wonderful one. The note of it was struck in the story of the birth night of Jesus when to the shepherds came the word, "I bring you good news of a great joy." The high had come to the humble. God had come to men.

Was there ever a day when we needed some word of joy more than ours?

I

We need to see what this joy is. Apparently there is something very distinctive about it. It is in the parables of Jesus over and over. He says that a man seeking the kingdom is like one who finds a pearl of great price "then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has." He made clear that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

It is also in the events of the New Testament. It is clearly stated that when the seventy went out at Jesus' command to preach, they "returned with joy." Jesus' own words about himself reflect it, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you." And most amazing of all are the surprising words in Hebrews, where it speaks of Jesus "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross."

What on earth is this? It stands in contrast to our ways. We use at least three words that seem alike but are vastly different. Sometimes we speak of pleasure. Many spend their days seeking it. Pleasure often means escape for a time from the hard realities of life. Or, we speak of happiness. Often we look upon it as something to be protected. We seem to relate it particularly to childhood before the real testings of life come. But

the joy of the Christian faith is deeper than either of these. It comes not in escaping from realities or being protected from the shocks of life. Joy is looking at life full face and finding the countenance of God in it.

Sometimes sit down and think of the times when you have seen real joy. I tried that this week. I have seen joy, and so have you. It is in the moment when a child growing into life passes another milestone of achievement and looks at you with a light on his face. It is in the moment when after anxiety about a loved one you hear the word that all is well, it is in the return of someone who has been away. It is in the hour when a guilt long carried is lifted. It is in those times of life when fulfillment has come. It is given when one discovers that he has a power which God means for him to use. It is in the times when we know we are loved. This is joy. It is the gift of God.

II

It can come to us today. For there are gifts that come to us in Jesus Christ which bring joy into life. There are four wonderful gifts that have come to us in Christ. From these our joy may spring. First, because of him we know what we did not know. You see, whenever we speak of Christ as the son of God we thereby confess that it is through him that we know about God. Doesn't the very word give us a picture? Suppose a man appears one day to you and says, I am the son of one who wants you to know him. I want to tell you about him, his will and his ways, his love and his compassion. Moreover, I am like my father. If you see me, you will see what he is like. So, he lives with you, and you hear his words and see his action and sense his love. Doesn't it mean that all the time he is with you, you are coming to know his father? And when the day comes that you meet him face to face you will say, O, I have known you for a long time, because your son told me about you. He is so much like you.

All of this seems so clearly implied in our belief in Christ as son of God. You want to know what God is and what He wills and what He wants for us. Then we have a way of knowing. When Christ comes we know what we did not know, namely, the nature and love of God.

III

Moreover, we become what we have not been. The gospel of John says that "to all who received him he gave power to become the sons of God." Now that power to become is one of the greatest in the world. We have many powers at our hand, and we are discovering more. We have a power to hurl satellites into the sky, the power to destroy a city with the dropping of a single bomb. We have power to do our work and often to help heal our bodies. But there is no other power that can be discovered that can help us become the sons of God. That was given only in Jesus Christ. It is given to all who receive Him.

A fine tradition says that when Michelangelo wanted to fashion his famous statue of David, which now stands overlooking the city of Florence, he went every step with an urgent prayer in his heart, "O God, reveal to me David." It was in his mind as he went to the quarry to get the finest stone. It was in the rumble of the wheels as he carted it back to his studio. With increasing absorption he worked as he fashioned from the stone the concept of David as it was revealed to him. But it is said that those who knew best saw that there was a change coming in the artist himself. He was somehow different as he worked. And then one day when the figure of David was complete, those nearest Michelangelo saw what had happened. His own countenance had taken on the marks of the figure he was fashioning. He had etched the lines of David in his own face, not knowing that it was happening to him.

And that power to become some-

thing we have not been is a great gift in Jesus Christ.

IV

Again, we hope where we had lost heart. Hope does not come easily for us. We have had it in earlier years of our century, but the shocks have been great, and our hopes have been shattered often. Can we hope again?

One Sunday morning some years ago we walked down the ruins of a street which once had been a great boulevard in Europe, the Unter den Linden. We passed the rubble of a great building where but a few years before Hitler had had his headquarters. It was almost literally true that not one stone was left standing on another. Here was the mark of an era of violence and hatred and destruction. One felt that the hand of God had reached out in judgment. But for a moment there was a passing scene. Walking toward the rubble I saw a mother with a small child holding her hand. It seemed a symbol. Here in the face of a terrible past was life beginning again. The wonder of our hope is that life always begins anew.

Here, on the one hand, were the rubble and destruction of our hatred and violence, and then a child, a new generation and life begins all over again with all the possibilities for good and evil, with all the choices that make up the future. Christmas is a time to remember that in the gift of a child God reminds us that life always starts over and so there is hope.

V

Finally, we belong where we have been alone. There are so many things that separate us from one another in our world. But Christ does bring us together and gives us a sense of our belonging.

Some years ago in another church there was a lad who was spending his first Christmas away from home, and a long way he had come. He had left his family in Nigeria and days later stood for the first time as a stranger in the heart of an American city. Everything was different. The faces were strange. The way of life was like another world. He bore on his face the t r i b a l markings that identified him, but there were no other faces here marked like that. How could a man endure so far from home in so strange a setting? There was just one great hope. He was a Christian. And when he went into his church he was at home again. It saved him from the weighty loneliness. Alone in many ways but still belonging to Christ he belonged to all others who love Christ, too.

Is it surprising then that this was the news of a great joy? Think of all that came to us in Christ! We know what we did not know. We become what we had not been. We hope where we had lost heart, and we belong where we had been alone. Small wonder that we can hardly think of Him without breaking into song, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!"

THE LOST CHORD IN THE ANGELS' SONG

Frank B. Fagerburg, First Baptist Church, Redlands, California

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace. Luke 2:14.

We have waited a long time—nineteen hundred years, and the promise is not yet fulfilled. Peace?

However, like every promise, this one has pinned to it a condition. Man has claimed the promise, but he has not fulfilled the condition. That condition is found in the first part of the song: "Glory to God in the highest." That is the lost chord. Peace on earth will come that day when men sing with their lives as well as their lips, "Glory to God in the highest."

I am not so credulous as to accept what a man says with his words and then belies with his deeds. We have

given God, the Father of Jesus, lip service while we have sacrificed at the altars of a dozen baals.

I

We have given lip service to our Heavenly Father while we have worshipped at the altar Mars. Through the centuries men have served him with their best, even while they have talked about Jesus, who is the utter antithesis of war. One country, alone, practicing such a ritual would not matter much, but set the fifty nations of the earth to doing the same and war is inevitable. We have sung "Glory to God in the highest," but we have lived "Glory to Mars in the highest."

II

Again we have sung to the God of Jesus while we have knelt before the great god Mammon. Call him gain, success, wealth—call him anything you wish, he is the same false god whom Jesus meant when he said, "You cannot serve God and Mammon." He has his earnest devotees. No Livingstone or Judson ever served more sacrificially than some of the followers of Mammon. They will do and dare and die for profit. Behind every intrenched evil of the world is greed. Name them all—liquor, prostitution, narcotics, war.

III

Then there is the great god Pleasure —you might call her Venus. That man is not really saying "Glory to God in the highest" who is spending every waking thought in planning for the next pleasure. Do not tell me that that Christian is exalting the Father of Jesus supremely who is spending more of his money on selfish indulgence and luxurious comforts than he is spending on the Kingdom cause.

That promise is as good as on that night long ago when Jesus was born. There can be peace on earth; there will be peace on earth when the lost chord of the angels' song is found again and we say with our lives as well as our lips—"Glory to God in the highest"; when in business and pleasure, in politics and in international relations, we make the God of love revealed in Jesus supreme.

Decades ago, after the burning of London, the great builder Christopher Wren presented a plan. In the new city, wide streets were all to converge upon the house of common prayer which stands today as his monument. The plans, however, could not be worked, for each householder insisted upon rebuilding exactly where his house had stood. Only when men stop insisting upon building t h e i r houses of life just where and as they have been, and, instead, place at the center of life the God of Jesus, only then can the promise be fulfilled—"Peace on earth"—for then have they said, "Glory to God in the highest."

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weighs heavily upon us. Then we will undoubtedly become aware of the great joy that is announced to us; and out of the brillance that surround the shepherds, a shining ray will fall into our darkness. This child is called "Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." Yes, God Himself has built a bridge from Himself to us! A dawn from on high has visited us!

Martin Niemoller

* * *

No great thing is accomplished without devotion.

John W. Gardner

Considerable good may come out of shooting men through space. For instance, earthlings might find one planet inhabited by people who have learned to live together in love and harmony, and be able to bring the secret back to us.

Oren Arnold

* * *

What is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?

Walt Whitman

* * *

Somehow the silver lining always seems easier to find in someone else's cloud.